

Making the case for photo IDs at the polls

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Updated 06:52 p.m., Monday, November 14, 2011

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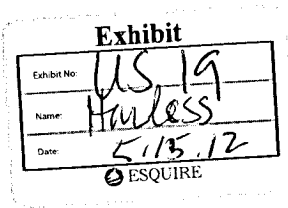
In order for our democratic republic to function and thrive, elections must be free of fraud.

Safeguarding election integrity, therefore, is among the primary functions of state government. The photo identification bill that we passed in the 82nd Texas Legislature is a significant measure to improve election integrity and safeguard against election fraud. Yet, as the U.S. Department of Justice reviews the law for pre-clearance under the Voting Rights Act, a barrage of inaccurate attacks has been levied against our election integrity bill that must be corrected.

Senate Bill 14, which we passed last session, requires individuals to show photo ID before voting. This bill lists several forms of government-issued photo ID to be accepted at polling places, including identification issued by DPS (for most this will be a Texas driver's license or ID card); a military identification card that contains the voter's photograph; a United States Citizenship certificate that contains the voter's photograph; a United States passport; and a license to carry a concealed handgun issued by the DPS. Senate Bill 14 requires DPS to provide a free photo election ID to registered voters who request an ID. The bill also provides reasonable exceptions to the photo ID requirement for indigent and disabled voters and allows individuals not carrying photo ID to vote provisionally, as long as they provide verification of their identity within six days of the election.

These provisions will ensure that eligible, qualified citizens are able to exercise their right to vote under a secure system that prevents election fraud. In April 2008 the U.S. Supreme Court upheld Indiana's photo ID law six-to-three in Crawford v. Marion. The judgment of the Court, issued by Justice Kennedy, undermines the continuing spurious claims made by opponents of photo ID requirements.

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While an ID requirement may place a burden on voters, Justice Stevens' opinion concluded that "burdens arising from life's vagaries, however, are neither so serious nor so frequent as to raise any question about the constitutionality of [photo ID requirements]." Justice Stevens' opinion also noted that for the few voters without ID, the burden of obtaining one, "does not qualify as a substantial burden on the right to vote." Justice Scalia's concurring opinion stated that "the universally applicable requirements of Indiana's voter-identification law are eminently reasonable" and that the burdens of photo identification were "minimal and justified."

Importantly, statistics from Indiana and Georgia show that ID requirements work well and do not suppress turnout, as opponents often claim. All along, our goal with photo ID has been to restore integrity to the electoral process, which will increase turnout.

Accordingly, showing photo ID before voting is a common-sense reform that is supported by a majority of Texas voters, regardless of political affiliation. For example, a University of Texas-Texas Tribune poll in February 2011 found that 75 percent of Texans agree "with the idea that registered voters should be required to present a government-issued photo ID at the polls before they can be allowed to vote." Even 54 percent of those who identify themselves as "strong Democrats" agree with a photo ID requirement. Independents show strong support for photo ID: 69 percent. Requiring a photo ID before you can vote has strong bipartisan support.

Ultimately, every fraudulent vote cancels out a legitimate vote, which means that election integrity is and must remain a top priority of state government. The Department of Justice has no basis to deny clearance of our election integrity laws given the Supreme Court's decision and ample experience from other states proving the efficacy of photo ID requirements.

Harless, a Republican, represents state House District 126 in northwest Harris County. She was the sponsor of Senate Bill 14, the photo voter ID legislation, in the Texas House.

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